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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/22/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: HARLEM GLOBETROTTERS: BEN ALI HEADED FOR A SLAM
DUNK VICTORY

REF: A. TUNIS 780
[1](#)B. TUNIS 769
[1](#)C. TUNIS 760
[1](#)D. TUNIS 746
[1](#)E. TUNIS 741
[1](#)F. TUNIS 725
[1](#)G. TUNIS 694

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In what may be this election season's strangest event, on October 17 the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) held an invitation-only rally for President Ben Ali featuring a 90-minute match between the Harlem Globetrotters and their long-time rivals, the Washington Generals. The real winner of the evening was Ben Ali, whose 7,000 cheering party supporters did not seem to notice the parallel between the RCD's electoral success and the Globetrotters' record against the Generals. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Embassy Tunis had a rare opportunity to witness a strange election rally the evening of October 17. An Embassy officer, having heard that the Harlem Globetrotters were in town, went to the November 7th Olympic Pavilion outside Tunis in search of tickets. The match had not been advertised, the box office was closed, and Emboff was informed that the event was an invitation-only political rally hosted by the RCD. Assuring the guards that he was simply there to watch the game, Emboff was allowed to enter.

[1](#)3. (U) The court was set up like an NBA arena with a polished wooden floor, hoops at both ends, a lighted scoreboard, and corporate sponsors' placards on all sides. The center of the court was dominated by the logo of Monoprix supermarket, one of the key business interests of Ben Ali son-in-law Marouane Mabrouk. The arena was decked out in bunting and drapes, all in red (the RCD color), while a 40-foot tall portrait of Ben Ali looked over the crowd of 7,000 or more. A massive security presence completed the scene.

[1](#)4. (U) A Tunisian female singer opened the show with a popular song; the excited crowd sang and danced along. She was followed by the Globetrotters' mascot, Globie, who did a breakdancing routine as the American announcer addressed the Arabic- and French-speaking crowd in English. The Globetrotters finally emerged, wearing their American flag uniforms, and began the familiar trouncing of their earnest opponents, the Washington Generals. Half-time saw more breakdancing, this time with Tunisian dancers. The chief drama of the game's second half came when a female spectator refused to kiss one of the Globetrotters on the lips.

[1](#)5. (C) Comment: This RCD rally, while perhaps bizarre, demonstrated the confidence and organizational ability of President Ben Ali's ruling party. The cheering crowds of party faithful were treated to a world-class singing, dancing, and basketball show. However, one wonders whether any of the President's guests noted the irony in hosting this

clearly uncompetitive basketball game at a campaign for this
clearly uncompetitive election. End comment.

GRAY